

VZCZCXRO9101
PP RUEHAG
DE RUEHCV #2527/01 2352040
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 232040Z AUG 06
FM AMEMBASSY CARACAS
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 5972
INFO RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUEHWH/WESTERN HEMISPHERIC AFFAIRS DIPL POSTS PRIORITY
RUEHAO/AMCONSUL CURACAO PRIORITY 0980
RUEHGL/AMCONSUL GUAYAQUIL PRIORITY 0618
RUEHUB/USINT HAVANA PRIORITY 0953
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY
RUMIAAA/HQ USSOUTHCOM MIAMI FL PRIORITY
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK PRIORITY 0468

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 CARACAS 002527

SIPDIS

SIPDIS

HQSOUTHCOM ALSO FOR POLAD
DEPT PASS TO AID/OTI RPORTER

E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/18/2016
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KDEM](#) [VE](#)
SUBJECT: HUGO CASTRO?: THE TORCH PASSING VIEWED FROM
VENEZUELA (NOT VENECUBA, YET)

REF: A. HAVANA 016136

[1](#)B. CARACAS 002367

CARACAS 00002527 001.3 OF 002

Classified By: ACTING POLITICAL COUNSELOR DAN LAWTON,
REASONS 1.4 (D)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary. The media images of President Chavez's August 13 visit with the ailing Fidel Castro have received wide press play in Venezuela. For many Venezuelans, they confirmed that Chavez aspires to succeed Fidel as the leader of the international socialist movement. Key Embassy contacts believe Chavez will make keeping a hard-line government in Cuba a self-preserving priority. These same contacts also believe that when Castro dies, Chavez will lose a vital mentor and crisis manager. While also clearly intended to intimidate his domestic opponents, the "passing of the torch" images may provide Venezuela's opposition with even more incentive to manage their internal differences. The bedside Chavez-Castro meeting has also provided post with valuable opportunities to disseminate the USG's post-Castro transition policy message. End Summary.

Pictures Worth Ten Million Words...

[1](#)2. (C) The Cuban state media images of President Hugo Chavez's August 13 bedside visit with Fidel Castro (Ref A) received wide distribution and comment throughout the Venezuelan media over the last several days. The pictures have been widely interpreted in Venezuela as visual confirmation that President Chavez is posturing to succeed the ailing Castro as the leader of the international socialist movement. The images are charged with blunt, symbolic meaning in support of the idea that Castro has anointed Chavez to be his heir apparent on the world stage.

[1](#)3. (C) Local attention has focused particularly on the pictures of:
-- Chavez standing next to a portrait of a young Castro, showing a direct linkage between the two;
-- A smiling Raul Castro looking on appears to be blessing the passing of the torch;
-- Fidel clad in Chavez's trademark red shirt (complete with

interlocking Venezuelan and Cuban flags);
-- Both leaders grasping Chavez's 80th birthday gift to
Castro - an ivory-sheathed dagger that reportedly belonged to
Simon Bolivar.

14. (SBU) Chavez's bedside visit with Castro has provided an
ideal opportunity to underscore the U.S. message on a
post-Castro transition. Charge' hosted an August 16 lunch
for senior journalists and former Venezuelan Ambassador to
the UN Milos Alcalay to reinforce with key opinion-makers our
support for a future of freedom for Cuba that will be defined
by the Cuban people, as well as our willingness to provide
humanitarian assistance to a democratic transition
government. Alcalay is arranging a follow-on August 25
discussion with other well-informed and influential
Venezuelans interested in Venezuela's relationship with Cuba.

...But Not Necessarily Votes

15. (C) The Castro-Chavez images from Havana have reinforced
the opposition's worst fears that Chavez intends to steer his
government in an even more radical direction after securing
victory in the upcoming December 3 presidential elections.
To many, they have visually substantiated the increasingly
prevalent idea that Chavez would like to transform the BRV
into "Venecuba" or "Cubazuela." They have also reminded
Venezuela's opposition, recently emboldened by its nomination
of Zulia Governor Manuel Rosales as a consensus presidential
candidate, that Castro remains Chavez's mentor and role
model.

16. (C) The images could help unite Rosales's fractious camp,
particularly as they plan beyond the presidential election.
Opposition strategists frequently note that they are trying
to build a meaningful domestic political bloc that can

CARACAS 00002527 002.3 OF 002

"contain" Chavez's radicalism after his almost certain
December 3 re-election. At his August 17 press conference to
announce his campaign team, Rosales used the occasion to
distance himself from Chavez's hero-worship of Castro, noting
that his government would not support either "imperialists or
the Bearded One" and would not align with "the terrorist
bloc."

No Domestic Brakes

17. (C) Senior journalists and former Ambassador to the UN
Milos Alcalay told the Charge August 16 that they did not
believe Chavez faced any domestic restraints right now with
respect to the internal Cuban succession process. Indeed,
all stressed that given the significant ongoing, close
"resources-for-advisors" relationship, the BRV and Cuban
governments are mutually dependent. Chavez's motivation to
support a hard-line successor to Castro, they said, would be
motivated not just by a ideological desire to promote
socialism in Cuba, but also a determination to perpetuate
Chavez's "Bolivarian revolution" in Venezuela. They also
noted that Chavez's closest advisors, including new Foreign
Minister Nicolas Maduro, would be inclined to support
Venezuelan adventurism in Cuba. In terms of tools, all
alluded to the BRV's ability to provide petroleum support and
cash, but did not rule out the possibility of the BRV
providing material military support.

Chavez's Dependency

18. (C) These same senior journalists and Alcalay opined that
Castro's death would be a significant loss to Chavez,
particularly during crises. They noted that it was Castro

that persuaded Chavez to resist the short-lived 2002 coup and Castro who steered Chavez to victory in the 2004 recall referendum by helping him launch the social missions programs (Ref B). Referring to one of Chavez's first meetings with Castro at an international gathering at which he was present, Alcalay described an over-eager Chavez as tamely accepting the brusque criticism by Castro. Alcalay noted that Cuban diplomats independently generated and distributed -- on behalf of the Venezuelan government -- distinctly anti-American talking points (in several languages) to the attendees of the NAM conference that followed the short-lived 2002 coup. The Venezuelan NAM delegation was still waiting for guidance from Caracas, Alcalay said.

Comment

19. (C) Chavez continues to play up his close relationship to Cuban leader Fidel Castro, most recently engaging in a lengthy, sentimental tribute to Castro during his August 20 televised "Alo Presidente" broadcast. Chavez's efforts to assume Fidel's "anti-imperialist" position internationally certainly received a boost from Castro's not-quite-deathbed endorsement. Chavez certainly has both the ambition -- and the ego -- to try to assume that mantle. Domestically, Chavez's very public hero-worship of Fidel serves as one of his most pointed domestic warnings -- and potential wake-up calls -- to his political opponents.

WHITAKER